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APPLIED ENGLISH COMPOSITION¹

CLYDE WILLIAM PARK

Professor of English, College of Engineering and Commerce
University of Cincinnati

The substitution of the word "composition" for the ancient term "rhetoric" a number of years ago, indicated a marked change in the general notion of how students should be taught to write. It freshened the teacher's point of view and offered a more natural approach to a subject which had been notoriously dry and difficult. Incidentally, it attracted a new type of composition teacher, one who knew how to write and who enjoyed especially the practice of rhetoric. Thus, under favorable conditions, the teacher became a leader, to whom his students were, so to speak, apprenticed. In addition to this bond of sympathy, the instructor had the distinct pedagogical advantage of being able to use the inductive method for whatever study of rhetorical theory might be undertaken. For the student, the new dispensation provided a visible goal, the joy of achievement, and the satisfaction of dealing with tangible realities. It made him see composition as a live subject, affording an outlet for the expression of his reaction to things which interested him.

It was precisely with regard to this question of dealing with the individual that the scheme found at once its greatest opportunity and its almost fatal weakness. The unfortunate fact is, that teachers of composition in recent years have found themselves increasingly embarrassed by their numerical prosperity. Much as they may appreciate the tribute paid to composition by administrative officials who prescribe it as a required subject, the teachers are appalled at the problem of making compulsory training of individuals effective among such colossal numbers. And well may they be disheartened! Given adequate lung power and a

¹ Part of an address delivered before the Southern Ohio Conference of Secondary School Principals and Teachers at their 1920 meeting.

sufficiently large auditorium, one may lecture to a veritable throng on the principles of composition. In the same way, I suppose, one might lecture on the principles of swimming or of driving an automobile. The life-saving crews and the traffic officers, I fear, would not find their tasks appreciably lessened by such wholesale instruction in arts, which, if learned at all, must be mastered by the individual. Even worse futility must be expected from attempts at "large-scale-production" methods in the teaching of the difficult and personal art of writing. A squad may, and frequently does, perform a laboratory experiment. A squad cannot write a composition.

Since it is true, then, that composition, to be effective, must be taught in terms of the individual, and that classes are as a general rule so large as to be unwieldy, what is to be done? We can hardly hope for a reduction in the number of students or for an appreciable increase in the teaching personnel. Is there a way out?

In attempting to answer this question, I wish to avoid any suggestion of dogmatism. Furthermore, I disclaim any intention of advancing as novel or original the recommendations I shall make. They are the result, partly of experience, but also largely of a comparison of notes with other teachers who have struggled with the same problem. I believe that they are sound enough to be something more than temporary expedients.

In the first place, the teacher of composition can organize his work, much after the fashion of a business man who classifies his correspondence. A working distinction can be made between group matters and individual matters. Arbitrary instructions dealing with mechanical details and other questions of correct form can be presented to a large class, explained, applied in written exercises, and then checked either by the writer or by someone with whom he has exchanged papers. All this can be done while the class is still in session. If the exercise is short, there may be time for rewriting, with a view to making the second draft 100 per cent correct. In spelling or punctuation drill, accuracy tests, and various other short exercises, such as in idioms or irregular verb forms, this plan may be followed. The teacher's work in rechecking is thus greatly lessened, and the student has had the benefit

of four instructive processes: writing, correcting, re-writing, and checking.

Nor need the teacher feel conscience-stricken over having shifted so large part of the work to the student. The result is not only to conserve the instructor's time for individual attention to important exercises, but also to intensify the student's concentration upon the subject in hand. Obviously this practice contributes far more to the student's real understanding than if the exercises had been collected at the first writing, corrected or rewritten by the teacher, and returned at the following class period, only to be put out of the student's consciousness after a moment's glance at the total grade earned. From the intensive, "follow-up" method during a single session, even though the class is large and the exercise is uniform, the individual may derive much benefit.

This group drill, although occupying a large proportion of the instructor's attention, is after all only a negative phase of composition, since the object is the correction of any practice which offends against good form. In so far as it is a subject for special rather than incidental attention, it is only a preliminary to composition proper, which provides for expression of the individual's point of view. When the latter purpose is intended, the instructor's problem is to get a type of assignment which will provoke a distinctly individual reaction. There is great danger that a general assignment addressed to a group will call forth a dead-level monotony instead, with compositions which betray in every line the perfunctoriness with which they were written.

I recall a sad experience that we once had at the university when we assigned to three hundred Freshmen the same long theme on the subject, "Qualifications Desirable in a Class President." The result, as might have been expected, was an almost uniform catalogue of virtues, enumerated by every student without enthusiasm, and with the evident purpose of simply meeting an absurd requirement. One instructor, a man above reproach, declared that after reading some forty of these dreary inventories of all the virtues, he felt a strong impulse to go out and get drunk in sheer reaction against their cumulative morality. It would have been a relief if some mischievous student, by way of contrast, had catalogued the

Seven Deadly Sins. Of course there were differences of handwriting and also individual peculiarities of expression here and there to vindicate the ownership of each theme. Variety of content, or real originality, was virtually impossible, and hence the reading of the manuscripts was insufferably fatiguing. When the instructor knows in advance what everyone is going to say, he picks up each manuscript with increasing reluctance, until, by the time he reaches the unfortunate students whose names extend from S to Z, he is in a mood that bodes ill for that part of the alphabet. On the other hand, if he knows that every student will say something *different*, as well as differently, he looks forward with curiosity, if not with eagerness, to each successive manuscript.

Fortunately it is possible to get a type of assignment that will call forth a different response from each student. The most successful themes of this kind that I have had were written for what we called a "Class Miscellany." Each student supplied his own subject and method of treatment, but all had the common purpose of writing something that would be interesting enough to justify reading it to the class. For example, one student sketched the character of an elderly Scotchman at whose house he was rooming, and in his account of "Twa Hoors at Hame" made us well acquainted with the old man's unusual personality. Another, in a pleasantly informal style, wrote on "My Music." This was a gossipy account of what the student played when he sat down at the piano for the sole purpose of entertaining himself, and why the different composers appealed to him. It may not have been "musical criticism" in the commonly accepted sense of the term, but it was a human document of uncommon interest. Another student wrote of his intimate contact with structural steel-workers, those daredevils of the building trades, in the construction of a skyscraper. Trying to realize the possibilities of such subjects as these and to express them adequately for their fellow-students gave the writers an experience in composition that I believe to be more valuable than the perfunctory writing of scores of conventional "themes." A definite problem, a congenial subject, and an impelling motive, all three were present. The combination of these ele-

ments is what distinguishes real, or "applied," composition from mere theme-writing.

An example of a group assignment which, though uniform, nevertheless stimulates individual reactions, is the speech of Ellis, the journalist in G. Lowes Dickinson's "A Modern Symposium." It will be recalled that this is a severe criticism of America as the land of mere quantity, where neither love nor religion exists, but where the native's only aim in life is to keep always moving, it does not matter whither. If the student is asked to write a letter to Mr. Ellis answering that hypothetical gentleman's strictures on America, an interesting thing happens. The student forgets that he is writing a theme, and in a style that is easy and natural pours out his real feeling upon a subject on which he has been deeply stirred. Thus, as in the "Miscellany," the proper conditions for applied composition exist. The writing assumes its natural relationship of means to end.

Although it is not my purpose to deal with oral composition, in itself a proper subject for a separate paper, I wish to suggest in passing that the foregoing example of a group assignment applies equally well to spoken English. If a student can become interested in his subject and purpose to the point of forgetting, or at least subordinating, the technique of expression, he will obviously develop more effectively than through numerous perfunctory, artificial exercises.

If the same favorable conditions occur in connection with a manuscript prepared outside the classroom, and for the purposes other than those of the English department, such an example is equally illuminating for the teacher of writing and may be more valuable than many assignments for compositions as such. An article for publication, a letter of application for a position, or even a petition to the faculty, may have great possibilities for instruction. If the expression be not an irreverent paraphrase, one may say that the student's necessity is the teacher's opportunity. To a large extent, the teaching of composition in the College of Engineering and Commerce of the University of Cincinnati is based on manuscripts which are intended for some purpose outside of the English department. Some of these exercises, such as

laboratory reports and inspection-trip reports, lend themselves to standardized or group instruction and emphasize general matters of correct form. Others, such as articles for technical journals, or reports on the student's outside work, present individual problems of organization and expression. Examples of the former are articles which students are now preparing for the Ohio River and Inland Waterways magazine, the Baltimore and Ohio Railway Employees' magazine, and other publications. All these assignments, whether group or individual, have one important thing in common! They make use of composition as a means to an end, and do not treat it as an end in itself; in other words, they are "applied" composition.

Perhaps the foregoing discussion may warrant us in laying down a few general propositions. Since, notwithstanding large classes, the individual must be given the greatest possible attention, the problems may be solved in part by organizing the work. Provision can then be made whereby standardized drill can be handled within the class period with a maximum of benefit to the student and a minimum of work for the teacher. Assignments which must be read exclusively by the instructor should be made fewer and more interesting. That is, they should afford variety of content and should call forth an expression of the student's personal point of view. If, in addition, a definite artistic or utilitarian purpose can be provided, the exercise will be still more profitable, since it will reproduce accurately the conditions under which real compositions are written.